

DESTINED TO LIVE WITH BULLS AND OXEN: THOTTIYANAICKER COMMUNITY IN TAMIL NADU

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Introduction

Theory of evolution reveals the fact that man came from animal. So, each and every man will have his own animal instinct. It is this animal instinct that shapes the relationship between man and animal. Sociologists always proclaim that man is essentially a social animal. So, man is born to live as a society which emerges as a separate social group based upon common ideologies and common animal instinct. Such separate social group further develops into a clan or community. It is natural that every community will have its own peculiar relationship and continuous association with a particular genre of animals based upon common animal instinct. In this way there exists a peculiar community called Thottiya Naickers community in Tamil Nadu having its own special bondage with a particular genre of animals namely bulls and oxen. This peculiar bondage with bulls and oxen continuing throughout their life cycle, though makes them even today a great pastoral community still remains inexplicable one. This article tries to trace out the origin and nature of this bondage of these particular animals with the community and wants to conclude that the bondage is actually created unaware of the community as the entire community itself is destined by birth to live with Bulls and oxen

Name of the Community Itself Revealing the Bondage

In Tamil Nadu Thottiya Naickers are called as Kambalathars also. Edgar Thurston would call them as Thottiyar or Kambalathar [Thurston, 2013, Vol.7:185]. There comes explanation as to how they came to be called as Kambalathar. These people were originally guarding the Kampli fort and on its destruction migrated to Tamil country. People came from Kampli country were called as Kambalathar [Pandiyana J.V, 2010, Vol 1:22]. Another explanation offered is that these people always use kambili as a sacred thing on all occasions and hence came to be known as Kambalathar [Thurston, 2013, Vol.7:190].

But no explanation comes forth so far, as to why these people are called as Thottiyar or Thottiya Naickers. Actually these names would suggest the nexus between the people and the genre of animals which they specially honour. Being a pastoral community that too a cowherd community they invariably use a peculiar type of cattle-shed in the form of a big round shaped encampus specially made up of a particular variety of thorny bushes to house their herd of cattles. This peculiar type of cattle-shed is called "Doddi" in Telugu. Thottiya Naicker community is a Telugu minority community living in Tamil Nadu and they call their cattle-sheds as "Doddi" only. Such Doddies can be seen in many places of Tamil Nadu where this community people are found in numerous. Such "Doddies" can be seen not only in unified Andhra, but also in Karnataka from where Thottiya Naickers would trace out

their ethnic origin. Telugu word “Doddi” can be written and pronounced in Tamil as ‘Thotti’ only since there is no pronunciation of “Do” or “Dho” available in Tamil. So, “Doddi” became “Thotti” in Tamil and “Doddiyar” became “Thottiyar” in Tamil Nadu.

Origin of Doddi Community

Ancestral Yadava clan was a great pastoral community. Out of this original yadava clan as many as 9 sub-pastoral communities emerged. They were called as “Kambalams” [Kulandai Velan, Dr.Nagasamy R, 1981, Vol 1:25]. During medieval period the people occupying Deccan region were divided into two groups based on their avocation. Agriculturists were called as Kapus and these sub-pastoral communities were called as Kambalam [Ramachandra Rao, 1976: 208]. In unified Andhra and Karnataka Yadavas are called invariably as “Gollas”. These “Gollas” migrated to Tamil Nadu are called as “Golla Kambalam”. This Golla community has a sub-division in unified Andhra called “Doddi Golla” [John Mitchel R, 2006]. Since it was essentially a cow-herd community it subsequently came to be called as “Doddi Kambalam”. It is in history that as many as 60 poligars out of 72 who ruled Madura region during medieval period were Telugu poligars of Thottiyanaicker community. They trace out their origin from unified Andhra and Karnataka. With regard to their caste many of them had explained that out of 9 Kambalam communities which emerged from ancestral yadava clan they belonged to “Doddi Kambalam” community [Kulandai Velan, Dr.Nagasamy R, 1981, Vol 1:115]. Even today people of Thottiya Naicker community in Tamil Nadu would refer their caste as “Doddi Kambalam” in their traditional folk songs and thus signifying their traditional bondage with “Doddi” and the cattles housed therein.

“Doddi Kambalam” becoming “Doddi Nayakas”

From the inception of Vijayanagar Empire “Gollavar” were entrusted mainly with sacred cows but the people of “Doddi Golla” were entrusted not only with sacred cows but also with bull-calves, bulls and Oxen for proper rearing. The reason was that these “Doddi Gollas” were born experts in rearing bull-calves and to train them to become mighty bulls and oxen fit enough to fight in warfare. In Telugu bull-calves are usually called as Chillalu. The Doddi community people engaged in rearing Chillalu also came to be called as Chillalu which term subsequently expanded as “Chillavaru” in Telugu [Pandiyana J.V, 2010, Vol 1:22]. Thus the people of Doddi Kambalam or Doddi community came to be called as “Chillavar” also. Vijayanagar army was consisting of a separate wing of such trained bulls and oxen and they were effectively and successfully employed in fighting against the enemies. Famous Nagama Nayaka was the General of this wing with which he won many of the battles [Seletore B.A., 1934, Vol 1:429]. It was Nagama Nayaka who originally drafted thousands of “Doddi Kambalam” youth first as soldiers and then elevated them as Military Chiefs and Generals of this wing. They also proved to be effective, useful and loyal to Vijayanagar Empire. Such soldiers, Military chiefs, Generals in any of the army were usually called as Nayaks. Since majority of “Doddi Gollas” or Doddi Kambalam invariably became such soldiers, Chiefs and Generals they were also called as Nayaks and with their caste prefix they came to be called as “Doddi Nayaks”. After their arrival in Tamil country, they

were first called as “Thotti Nayaks” in Tamil and then as “Thotti Nayakars” and ultimately as “Thottiya Naickers”. Because of these significant reasons people of Thottiya Nayaka community especially chillavar sub-sect people who served as Chiefs and Generals in Vijayanagar army were rewarded with majority of the posts of “Poligars” to rule the erstwhile Madura region [Taylor, 1835, Vol 2: 10, 18]. After becoming such a ruling class they began to call their community as Rajakambalam also [Thurston, 2013, vol 7: 190].

Social Structure and Hierarchy of the Community Itself based on Bondage with “Doddi and Cattles Housed Thereon

Thottiya Nayaka community is having a well organized social structure and hierarchy. However, the same is found to be based on bondage with “Doddi” and cattles housed thereon. A village level head is called as “Ooru pedda”. A cluster of villages will form a zone and such a zonal head is called as “Mandha Pedda” or “Dinna pedda” or “Karai pedda” depending upon their respective geographical divisions. They are collectively called as “Doddi Peddalu”. Both Doddi and Mandha are considered as the same. At the first instance all the disputes including caste disputes will be resolved by Mandha Pedda, Doddi Pedda etc.,. To assist them there will be a “Kodangi Nayakkan” and “Mettu Nayakkan” [Ibid: 189]. Unresolved disputes will go to “Nagiri Pedda” who is none other than the Poligar himself. His word will be final. To perform purifying ceremonies there will be a spiritual head called “Kambli Nayakkan” [Ibid]. They don’t accept the supremacy of any other community in religious matters and never allow them to perform any purifying ceremonies or rites [Ibid: 196].

Here, the point is such powerful Mandha Pedda or Doddi Pedda etc are none other than the heads of a very big Mandha or Doddi comprising hundreds of cows, calves, bulls and oxen. They are selected as heads by applying several tests apart from seniority. There after they will be crowned as the head by conducting several ceremonies and rituals. After getting crowned the head will be called as a Pattakadu in Telugu and Pattakarar in Tamil. In the very same way for the “Doddi ‘or’ Mandha’ under his control a bull or oxen will be selected as the head and the same will also be crowned as the King bull after conducting very same ceremonies. Such a king bull will be called as Pattam Eddu or Devara Eddu. Eddu in Telugu would mean a bull or oxen. King bull, Pattam Eddu, Devara Eddu all would mean a sacred bull or oxen crowned to be the head of a Doddi or Mandha. Thus Mandha pedda or Doddi pedda and the king bull or Pattam Eddu or Devara Eddu are considered to be on par with each other. In case of death of both the categories the funeral ceremonies and rites also will be the same. It is the common belief of these people that the well being and flourishing of a Mandha pedda or Doddi pedda will be depending upon the well being and flourishing of a king bull in the Doddi or Mandha. This life long association and incredible bondage between the two would speak volumes about the fact that the people of Thottiya Naicker community really destined to live with bulls and oxen.

Naming System of the Community based on Cattle – Rearing

It is the usual practice of many castes to conduct tonsuring and ear-boring Ceremony during the tender age of a child. People of Thottiyanaicker community in addition are

conducting 'naming' Ceremony also. The first name will be invariably their family deity's name. Since they consider Doddi and cattles housed thereon as their family deities they used to name their children with the terms referring to them. In case of male children they will be named as Doddaiyya, Eddulayya, Avalayya, Peyyalayya, Eddulavulu, Thoppayya etc. Female Children used to be named as Doddiamma, Doddichi, Eddulamma, Avulamma, Peyalamma, Thoppamma etc. In Telugu "Doddi" means cattle shed, Eddulu means bulls or oxen, Avulu means cows, peyyalu means calves both male and female and Thoppa means cow dung. Not stopping with this they used to name their villages also referring to Doddi and cattles housed thereon. For example we can cite Doddipalli, Doddikotta, Eddula Doddi, Avula Doddi, Peyyala Doddi, Malla Doddi, Eddulu Nayanipalli, Avula Nayani palli, Peyyala Dinna, Thoppala Doddi etc. So, the naming system followed by the community itself shows that these people are born to live mainly with bulls and oxen housed in Doddi or Mandha.

Early References as to Origin of the Community and Bulls and Oxen

Doddi Kambalam (Chillavar) sect has 9 sub-Divisions for the purpose of marital relationship. The first sub-division is called as "Irri". The entire Thottiyanaicker community showers reverence to this first sub-division Irri and treat them on par with Lord Shiva. Their traditional folk song in Telugu goes to say

"Irri putta Marri putta,
Kurra, Nahama Kuda putta".

Meaning is when Lord Shiva was born Irri also born to represent mankind, Marri (Banyan Tree) was born to represent the botanical world, Kurra (Bull or Oxen) was born to represent the animal world and Nahamma (cobra) was born to represent the reptiles of course all to serve Lord Shiva. Born to serve Lord Shiva, Irri (Doddi Kambalam) and Kurra (Bull or Oxen) became inseparable and infact Irri sub-division in Thottiya Naicker (Rajakambalam community) would proclaim that they actually belong to 'Yeddu' Vamsam and not 'Yadhu' vamsam as termed in Sanskrit. So, from the inception of this community they are destined to live with bulls and oxen ofcourse as ordant disciples of Lord Shiva. Curiously Hindu mythology says LordShiva sits under a banyan tree, travels on a bull or oxen's back, wears cobra on his neck. So, Irri considers bull or oxen as a symbol of Lord Shiva and showers reference throughout his life cycle.

References in Telugu Epic Kattamaraju Katha (Medieval period)

Kattamaraju was a Yadhava (Golla) king who ruled Kalyanpura, Hampi, Srisailam and Donakonda regions in the beginnings of medieval period. He is known as Golla Raju in Telugu. Kattamaraju was none other than a head of congregation of several cattle rearing assemblies called Mandhalavaru. So, he was the head of all Mandhas or Doddhis consisting of thousands of cows, bulls, oxen etc. The Telugu epic describes elaborately as to how he got crowned as the head of Avula Mandha. It clearly says that he was crowned with the Avula Mandha pattam and thus became a great Pattakadu. So, he appears to be a big Mandha pedda or Doddi pedda ruling several small size cattle rearing assemblies. Interestingly there was a great king bull in his Mandha bearing nickname 'Bollavu'. The epic describes how the

sacred bull “Bollavu” was loyal to Kattamaraju and how ferociously it fought against the enemies in warfare. At last this Bollavu also perished fighting in warfare along with king Kattamaraju [Giri Prasad, Velappan. Pon, 1997, Vol 2]. One has to wonder to see such a life long association in between man and animal (bulls and oxen) still survives in the community of Thottiya Naickers in Tamil Nadu.

Role Played by this Combination of Community and Bulls and Oxen in Vijayanagar Army

As already stated Vijayanagar army was consisting of a separate wing of trained bulls and oxen and Nagama Nayaka was the General of this wing with which he won many of the battles [Seletore BA, 1934, Vol.I:429]. Nagama Nayaka drafted his own Doddi community youth to serve this wing first as soldiers and then elevated them to the positions of Chiefs and Generals depending upon their fighting skills. These youth hailing from Doddi community were experts in rearing bull-calves and to train them to become mighty bulls, oxen fit enough to fight in a warfare. Both the youth and the bulls and oxen trained by them fought effectively and successfully against the enemies and won many of the battles. Because of this bravery shown by the community in combination of their bulls and oxen many of Doddi community (Chillavar) Chieftains were subsequently honoured with the powerful positions of poligars to rule erstwhile Madura region when poligar system was first introduced by Nayak Kings of Madura there. It is said out of 72 Palayams nearly 60 were controlled by the poligars of this community [Singh K.S, 1996, Col VIII: 591].

Role of Bulls and Oxen in Marriage Ceremonies of the Community

Marriages of Thottiyanaickers take place in a tribal way even today. Their marriages are conducted in the outskirts of the village in open places called ‘Ooru Mandha’. Irrespective of their social and economical status they are conducting marriages by putting up temporary pandals using fresh green leaves of prescribed variety of trees fetched from hillocks or forests [Thurston, 2013, Vol 7 : 192]. Their marriage dress, ceremonies conducted, things used would resemble their primitive and tribal way of life revealing the fact that they were ‘hunters’ turned ‘cattle rearers’ and then ‘agriculturists’ turned ‘Military Chiefs’. During the first phase of marriage ceremonies on arrival of either bride or bridegrooms party in the outskirts of the village the local residents will go in a mass to greet them. Along with them they will lead a bull or oxen giving much reverence to it [Ibid: 185]. There will be exchange of enquiries in the form of marriage songs as to their respective sub-divisions and other particulars. On satisfaction, the belongings of bride or bridegroom as the case maybe will be loaded on the back of the bull or oxen and all of them unitedly lead the bull or oxen to marriage pandal [Ibid: 185]. After completing all the marriage ceremonies and after arriving their own residence the newly married couple will be taken to ‘Doddi’ where in the king bull that is the sacred bull is moving freely. As a completing ceremony the couple and their near relatives will worship Doddi in their traditional way in the presence of the sacred bull or oxen. Lord Shiva himself is deemed to be present in the form of King bull offering blessings to newly married young couple to start their new marital life.

Jalli and Jallikkattu During Pongal Festival

Thottiyanaickers of Tamil Nadu celebrate pongal festival in a peculiar way showing reverence and honour, to bulls, oxen and sacred cows. Name 'Mattu pongal' itself would suggest the significance of bulls or oxen in the celebrations. The elders used to go to hillock or forests on the previous night itself to fetch medicinal shrubs to be administered to the bull-calves and cow-calves. On the next day morning after preparing the medicine with the help of female children all will go to 'Doddi' and start to administer medicine to calves one after another. The king bull and other sacred cows will be watching the affair. On completion of this affair an elderly person will chant mantras wearing kambili and the entire herd of cattle will be made alert. Thereafter the 'Doddi' will be opened and the entire cattle will be allowed to run freely ofcourse towards hillocks. People will follow them and pacify them so that the entire cattle shall be brought back to Doddi in the evening. This free running of cattles comprising cows, calves, bulls, oxen etc is called as Jalli in Telugu and "Eruthottam" in Tamil.

Jallikkattu is another form of Jalli conducted during pongal festival. In Jallikkattu a third party comes into picture to tame the bull which is let loose to run freely. This stranger in order to stop or tame the bull applies force and reciprocally the bull also shows vigour to escape from the clutches of the stranger. Thus in Jallikkattu there emerges force and a rashness capable of creating dangerous situation not only for participants but also for the spectators. But in Jalli there is no place for such violence or danger. There will be none to disturb the free running of the cattle including bulls and oxen. It is pertinent to note here that Thottiyanaickers of Tamil Nadu always showing reverence and honour to bulls will usually conduct Jalli only during pongal festival and not Jallikkattu. Even during Jallikkattu organized by other communities the participation of Thottinaicker community would be rare.

Thottiyar Malai or Malai Festival (Worshipping Ancestors)

In the outskirts of Thottiyanaicker villages there will be hero stones of their ancestors and also stone engravings called 'Malai Kambam' [Thurston, 2013, Vol 7:194] Thottiyanaickers invariably consider their own ancestors as God omnipotent. Along with their own ancestors they consider sacred bulls and oxen also as their ancestors. Even in Malai Kambams the images of cows and bulls and oxen are found to be engraved. The entire community used to worship not only their own ancestors but also the sacred bulls and oxen during their Malai festivals. Their community deities Jakkamma and Bommakka were none other than once cattle rearers who got perished committing Sati. Many of the family deities of this community are their own ancestors who were rearing cattles. In all such worship of family deities Thottinaickers are invariably conducting Malai festivals. Malai festival always includes Jalli that is free running of bulls and oxen to please their ancestors and the same is considered as a concluding ceremony of the Malai festival.

During Malai festival after completing all the ceremonies and all the religious rituals in worshipping their ancestors they will assemble to worship and honour the sacred bulls and oxen which died along with their ancestors. They will give a call to all Doddhis and Mandhais

to bring bulls and oxen to conduct a free running of them to please their ancestral deities. Once all the Mandha peddas and Doddi peddas assembled before the temple with their respective bulls and oxen the local Mandha pedda or Doddi pedda will greet them along with their woman folk. Ceremonies will be conducted in honour of all the bulls and oxen assembled [Ibid: 195]. Then they all will be taken to a far away place and will be made to stand on a line. Then at the stroke of a particular sound all the bulls and oxen will be allowed to run freely upto to the temple. There will be a mark in the form of white cloth in front of the temple suggesting the winning mark. The bull or oxen which crosses first this winning mark will be selected as the victorious one. Such victorious bull or oxen will be showered with honours and reverence [Ibid]. This free running is called as Jalli. The people of Thottiyanaicker community consider this Jalli as the concluding ceremony of their Malai festival. Satisfactory completion of this Jalli ceremony alone decides the success of every Malai festival.

A Rare Musical Instrument Called “Doddalu” to Tame the Animals

All leading cattle rearers of Thottiyanaicker community invariably use a rare musical instrument called “Doddalu” to smoothly conduct their cattle. This “Doddalu” made up of bamboo trees is specially made for taming the bulls and oxen with its melodious sound. Thottiyanaickers proudly say that this “Doddalu” was offered to them by Lord Krishna to calm down ferocious sacred bulls and oxen. This instrument is used not only to tame and to smooth down the mood of the cattle but also to arouse and alert the feelings of them. Very interesting point is that this rare musical instrument “Doddalu” is not at all found in possession of any of the pastoral communities except the community of Thottiya Naickers. In other words except Thottiya Naickers none of the other pastoral communities are using this instrument. None of them found even in possession of this instrument. So, the exclusive possession and use of this rare musical instrument called ‘Doddalu’ by Thottiya Naicker community by itself explains the inexplicable life long relationship between this community and the genre of bulls and oxen they rear.

No Commercial use of Cows, Bulls, Oxen etc

The entire community of Thottiyanaickers would show only due reverence and honour to the sacred cows, bulls, oxen etc on all times and would never use them for any commercial purposes. They never used to sell any of such sacred calttles for money. Not even young calves are sold. If any sacred cow, bull, oxen etc are dead their corpses won't be disbursed to any body for consuming. Instead those corpses will be given a decent burial. The King bulls and oxen will be considered on par with Doddi pedda or Mandha pedda and will be given a ceremonious burial after gathering a congregation and performing elaborate funeral ceremonies. The milk derived from sacred cows will be utilized first for the consumption of their calves and if any balance is available it will be consumed by the members of the family only. Outside sale of such milk is never allowed. Cattle rearing for reverence only and not for any commercial purpose would make this Thottiyanaicker community a true, typical, great and noble pastoral community deserving for due appreciation and preservation from all quarters.

Conclusion

Thus there exist ample evidence and evidentiary materials to explain the inexplicable life long bondage of Thottiyanaicker community with the bulls and oxen which they rear and honour. The various cultural traits in the form of ceremonies and rituals followed and continuously conducted by the community for centuries together would reveal the fact that the community and the genre of sacred bulls and oxen are inseparable at any stage of their life cycle. It is evident that this life-long bondage is created unaware of the community as the entire community is destined by birth to live with such sacred Bulls and Oxen. In the presence of such overwhelming evidence in the form of both primary and secondary data covering the entire period of their life cycle one is justified in proclaiming that this Thottiyanaicker community is a rare community, really born to live with rather destined to live with these bulls and oxen which they rear and honour.

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